

Creative Creatures and their Creation Scenes: Jennifer Johnston's *This Is Not a Novel*

Teresa Casal

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

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Introduction

Jennifer Johnston was born in Dublin in 1930 and has lived in Derry, Northern Ireland, since the mid-seventies. So far, she has written fifteen novels and various short plays, some of which have been translated into several languages, while all of her novels are available in French translation.

Primarily known as a novelist, her work resists the monothematic categorisations under which it has predominantly been read, such as Big House, Troubles, or women's literature. Her first novel, *The Captains and the Kings*, was published in 1972, and her latest, *Foolish Mortals*, in October 2007. She therefore started to write at a time that coincided with the onset of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in 1968, with sectarian strife and paramilitary and military violence transforming the province into a war zone until the 1994 ceasefires and the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Her career spans a period that largely overlaps with the three decades of violence, mistrust, trauma and a sense of impasse in Northern Ireland. Yet it also responds to the turn-of-the-century changes on both sides of the Irish border, specifically the "Celtic Tiger" economic boom and social changes in the Republic, and the painstaking peace process in Northern Ireland which culminated in a power-sharing government inaugurated on Devolution Day (8 May 2007). Her work responds to a historical shift in Ireland's experience of the past, so that the perception of the *excessive* and paralysing presence of the past in the present during the Troubles – which, though affecting primarily Northern Ireland, was tangible in the South as well – gives way to a *thinning* of the past in today's confident, affluent and rapidly changing Republic.

However, both when depicting the entrapment in the past in her earlier novels, and the fleeting immediacy of the present in her recent ones, Jennifer Johnston's work suggests that it is only by putting the internalised past in perspective that the present and the future may be envisaged. They do so both formally and thematically. Formally, their elliptic prose and increasing display of their narrative and fictional status unsettles the expectations and internalised mechanisms of realistic-minded readers, thereby inviting what Derek Attridge calls "readerly hospitality, a readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding" (Attridge, 59). Thematically, they do so by portraying characters whose perception of life is disrupted, usually by exposure to violent circumstances, and who must re-approach their lives from an exploratory and deframed perspective which usually involves a dialogic process with themselves, through introspection and retrospection, and with some sort of an interlocutor.

In increasingly explicit ways, Johnston's novels draw the reader's attention to their fictional and narrative status. They thus ostensibly "suspend the eschatological in order to inscribe us in a meaningful past," as argued by Ricoeur:

To "repeat" our story, to retell our history, is to re-collect our horizon of possibilities in a resolute and responsible manner. (...) To say that narration is a recital which orders the past is not to imply that it is a conservative closure to what is new. On the contrary, narration preserves the meaning that is behind us so that we can have meaning before us. There is always *more* order in what we narrate than in what we have actually lived, and this narrative excess (*surcroît*) of order, coherence and unity, is a prime example of the creative power of narration. (Ricoeur, 103-4)

This is precisely what happens in *This Is Not a Novel* (2002), which draws attention to its fictional or non-fictional status by overtly playing with its allusion to Magritte.

“Intertwining” echoes: *This Is Not a Novel* (2002)

*This Is Not a Novel*¹ is a novel of echoes: it announces itself as “not a novel” (TINN 1), but a “*cri de coeur*, a hopeful message sent out into the world, like a piece of paper in a bottle dropped into the sea.” Imogen Bailey, the narrator, hopes that her “brother Johnny (...) may read it and may pick up the nearest telephone” (1-2). The dialogic frame within which the writer addresses her brother is replicated within the “message” itself: Imogen’s memoir is prompted by the letters and diaries found in the family trunk that she inherited after her father’s recent death, and reproduces and comments excerpts from those fragments of the past. This familiar enough fictional device has a double effect: it affords snapshots of the family’s, and Ireland’s, twentieth-century history; and this polyphonic view of the past in turn offers internal and external perspectives of the narrator’s predecessors, so that older and younger generations may reveal aspects of one another. It is precisely the voices behind the chronology of events that Imogen seeks to retrieve as she listens to the echoes from the past and incorporates them in her own assessment of how they developed into the present. If, as Richard Kearney puts it, “It takes two to story” and “there is no common genre of telling one’s story *to oneself alone*” (Kearney, 45),² Imogen acknowledges this necessary dialogue with the others belonging to her present and to her past when, just before her final words, she writes in a letter to her brother:

I would love to think that there was someone in the world with whom I could share the past and try to untangle the threads of our inheritance, our weaknesses and whatever strengths we may have.
It is our past, Johnny. (TINN, 211)

¹ Henceforth quotations from *This Is Not a Novel* are indicated in the text by the abbreviation TINN.

² Commenting on “narrative therapy” and citing Adam Philips’s *Flirtation* (1994), Kearney makes the point that there is always an explicit or implicit addressee in stories: “Even personal diaries and journals, it could be said, are implicitly addressed to another, even if it is an alter-ego of the diarist her/himself as s/he imagines her/himself to be, residing at some remove from the immediacy of the experiences described in the diary itself.” (Kearney, 165n15)

In her wording, the communication and commonality that she seeks through dialogue involves “sharing” and “untangling” a common “inheritance.” The past is therefore not perceived as an immutable given that in some deterministic way produces a given present; nor is it a finished event, open as it is to revisitations from the present which, by engaging with testimonies from the past, may turn an overpowering burden into an accepted “inheritance.”

Imogen’s narrative, in constant dialogue with past voices and a present addressee, shows how she conceives this process: she does not obliterate others’ voices, rather listens and responds to them, allowing previously held views and feelings to be changed in the process; she recognises family resemblances and derives a sense of belonging from them, yet does not regard others’ life-stories as fatal verdicts on her own; she treasures continuity, but does not equate it with repetition. Telling her story thus involves putting it in perspective and in dialogue with other, and others’, perspectives: the “large trunk full of papers, letters, diaries, press cuttings and old photographs, all pertaining to [her father’s] family” (TINN, 10), provides the tangible remains which lead her to a literal rereading of both past and present.³ As the appeal to her brother shows, such re-reading is not final; it is rather an opening engendering other openings, like an unfolding and unpredictable dialogue.

By claiming the vital interestedness of her “message,” and disclaiming the potentially solipsistic superfluity of fiction, Imogen stresses the dialogic, dynamic and unfinished format of her utterance. However, given the recognisable fictional traits that characterise her attempt to authenticate her narrative as non-fiction – it is not a novel but “a piece of paper in a bottle dropped into the sea” (1) –, Imogen’s claim of her narrative’s bearing on reality ends up applying to what is, after all, a

³ Imogen, like many a Johnston’s reminiscing protagonist, illustrates Ricoeur’s point about the “ethics of memory,” which “is possible because memory has two kinds of relation to the past,” the first being “a relation of *knowledge*, while the second is a relation of *action* [for] remembering is a way of *doing* things, not only with words, but with our minds; in remembering or recollecting we are exercising our memory, which is a kind of action” and raises the issue of the “*use* and *abuse* of memory,” hence of ethics. (Ricoeur, 5)

fictional narrative. Imogen's attempt to emphasise the differences between fiction and non-fiction therefore highlights some similarities instead. As a result, it unsettles both the notion that fiction is inherently solipsistic and superfluous, and the notion that non-fiction requires belief in its truth and dispenses with interpretation.

Ambiguously placed (and played) between fiction and non-fiction, Imogen's narrative makes the reader aware of "the experience of fiction," which Peggy Kamuf describes as "essentially equivocal, hanging as it does between the suspension of the referent, as signalled by fiction's mark, and the persistence of the assumption of referential language, whereby fiction also always exceeds itself toward something other" (Kamuf, 163). The reader is thus faced with the need to assess the *relation* between reality and fiction.

In the beginning was "ceci n'est pas une pomme": narrative frameworks

The reader coming for the first time to a book called *This Is Not a Novel* will be confronted with the provocative title printed on a cover that reproduces René Magritte's painting "*L'Empire des Lumières*" (1954), translated on the back cover as "House of Lights." The painting is a seemingly realistic depiction of a house partly revealed by internal and external light, and partly concealed in the shade by its closed shutters, surrounding trees and darkness, in a *chiaroscuro* that is further reflected in a pond. At first sight, it is a nocturnal scene, yet a second look will detect how realism is undermined by surrealism since the nocturnal scene is set against a diurnal sky. The painting unsettles the innocent viewer, as does the title, though the artistically literate reader will find in Magritte an anchor for this procedure of defamiliarising certainties, making you aware of the conventions upon which representation rests (one cannot light the image of a pipe or the word "pipe" any more than one can bite the image of an apple or the word "apple"), and asking you to step into a world where day and night, revelation and concealment, coexist, as in "House of Lights."

How is one then to read a book that declares itself not to be a novel, yet offers contradicting signs to that effect, since the claim is made both

by the author Jennifer Johnston, whose name features on the cover under the title, and by Imogen Bailey, the narrator, who begins her account by stating that “This is not a novel” (TINN, 1)? Moreover, the book carries two dedications, one before and the other after Imogen’s narrative: the first is to a friend of the author’s, while the latter, in memory of Francis Ledwidge, could be attributed either to the narrator or to the author. Following the title page, there is the usual statement that “All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.” Imogen is Johnston’s creation but whereas the author writes fiction, the narrator asks to be read as non-fiction, with its attendant truth-claims and ethical implications. Caught in this conundrum, the reader, like the viewer of Magritte’s variations on “The Betrayal of Images” theme, is provoked into a cautious awareness of the implied codes for reading fiction and non-fiction and is likely to neither adopt the suspension of disbelief required by realistic fiction, nor endorse the truth-claims of non-fictional memoirs.

Stripped of certainties from the beginning, the reader will have to adjust her or his expectations and degree of belief or disbelief in the process of reading, in what parallels Imogen’s own exercise of memory, which consists in the process of reading and re-reading signs from the past. The “House of Lights” reproduced on the book’s cover, with its realism undercut by surrealism, is an apt metaphor for the reader’s predicament (caught between reality and fiction), while hinting at the Baileys’ family house called Paradise, which turns out to be a rather problematic Garden of Eden, not unlike, after all, the imponderable biblical one.

Creative creatures and their scenes of creation

Imogen’s piecing together of her family’s past and its echoes and variations across generations is itself framed within the scene of creation that opens the novel:

This is not a novel.
I want to make that perfectly clear.
Normally when I set out to write a piece of fiction, I invent
a setting, a landscape, a climate, a world, in fact, that has no

reality outside the pages of the book, and into that world I insert my characters. I become the puppet master and I tweak and push these wretches, who, like us, have never asked to be born, through all sorts of contortions, until that merciful moment when I type those exultant words, 'The End'.

A bit like God, really, who I'm sure had the best intentions when he created the world and then popped those two innocents into his Garden of Eden. Did he, at that moment, sit back, fold his hands and smile at his own handiwork? If so he must have got the shock of his life when that old serpent slithered on to the scene and blew his scenario sky high.

I am not sure into what category this piece of writing should fall. (TINN, 1)

If writing a piece of fiction involves "inventing" a world "that has no reality outside the pages of the book," it nevertheless bears two crucial likenesses to that reality: it makes the writer "become the puppet master (...) a bit like God," and it makes her creatures be born "like us [who] have never asked to be born." This "world that has no reality outside the pages of the book" is then created in the likeness of Imogen's version of the genesis, featuring a non-omnipotent creator who sees his newly created Garden of Eden being intruded upon by "that old serpent." One is tempted to wonder whether the old serpent was part of God's creation or belonged to the obscure origins from whence God emerged. Be it as it may, both creator and creatures are exposed to forces beyond their control: human beings have no control over the fact that they are born at all, and God has no control over what happens in his newly created garden. In Imogen's playful rendering, the imponderable unknown belongs to creation from the very beginning: to create is to play with the possibilities of the world, setting in motion unforeseen connections that involve the potential confrontation with the feared unknown; it further involves playing with the possibilities of the word which likewise elude the experienced writer's *a priori* categorisation: "I am not sure into what category this piece of writing should fall." Imogen thus invites the reader into a scene of creation rendered as unfinished and open to unpredictability, change and questioning:

What would have happened, I wondered, if that serpent, at the last moment, just as Eve was about to take the fateful bite, had said softly into her ear, 'And by the way, Madame, *ceci n'est pas une pomme*'?

Would she have clobbered him with a fig leaf and thrown the apple away? In which case, would the world now be a very different place, filled with harmony and love, fraternal feelings everywhere, nobody eating apples or writing books more subversive than 'Noddy in Toyland'? (TINN, 2-3)

In the beginning of the story then was curiosity, with the desire to know prevailing over the injunction to obey and remaining as the inherent mark of creation and its creative creatures; these are both created *and* creators since the possibility, and attendant responsibility, to take or not take "the fateful bite" is inscribed in their genetic code from the beginning. Imogen's choice of the adjective "fateful" to refer to the bite further intimates what Corey Robin notes in the opening lines to *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (2004). As he writes, what follows from that curious bite is fear, "the first emotion experienced by a character in the Bible" (1): "Not until they eat the forbidden fruit do we hear of felt experience. And when we do, it is fear. Why fear? Perhaps because, for the authors of the Bible, fear is the most electric of emotions. (...) Shallow temptation gives way to dramatic choice, inertial motion to elected action." (1)

That to tell is itself an "elected action" is highlighted in Imogen's re-telling and questioning of the scene of creation, a gesture that casts *the* beginning as *a* beginning that is narratively created *a posteriori*. This is in line with Rob Pope's understanding of myths of creation as "*re-creation* myths" for two reasons: firstly, "every creation myth involves creation from something"; secondly, "every telling or presentation of a creation myth is in some measure a re-telling or re-presentation of a version or vision that is held already to exist" and "it is the very words, stories, images and associated actions of a myth which themselves in the *event* – *through* the processes of narration and dramatisation – *realise* the moment of creation [and] *bring* its truth *into being*," so that the "telling or performance of the myth (...) can be grasped as an *embodiment* and an *enactment*, not simply the record or rehearsal of a prior state" (Pope, 137). If narration re-enacts

creation, it does so in a dialogic framework that includes an interlocutor in the role of witness and co-creator, thereby reiterating Kearney's argument that "God depends on us to be. Without us no Word can be made flesh" (Kearney, 4). Creativity is thus presented as a dialogic and collaborative process in which the creator and the creature participate as co-responsible and interdependent creative agents. Just as the reader has ceased to be a "passive consumer of literature" (Eagleton, 53), in this democratic genesis creation is not the finished product of an autocratic creator and, out of curiosity and fear, the creature has become co-creative.

Imogen's account of the co-responsible relation between creator and creature is akin to Collette Fellous's rendering of the relationship between God whose word was made flesh and the creature that now re-creates through words. In *Aujourd'hui* (2005), the French writer born into a Jewish family in Tunisia recreates the day (5 June 1967) that marked a turning point in her own and her native country's history. Her narrative is a tentative re-creation that stretches towards past and future "todays" and inscribes itself in a genealogy of scenes of creation. Early on the narrator announces the scene as it was played for the first time: "Voici la scène quand elle a été jouée pour la première fois" (28); yet, after playing it, an interlocutory voice claims not to have understood and asks to be told the story "plus précisément," to which the narrator acquiesces: "Alors, viens plus près et regarde. Voici un autre jour pour compléter la scène. Mais c'est juste un exemple." (29) No telling, it emerges, will ever exhaust the story to be told so that every retelling is a tentative and approximate "example" of the creative scene. In *Aujourd'hui*, God is "celui qui a eu la délicatesse de s'absenter du monde. Il déteste entendre dire qu'on croit en lui, il est l'allié de ce que je ne sais pas prononcer, il aime mon silence, et comprend toutes les langues, même celles qui n'existent pas encore. Il est à la fois une espèce de double et d'étranger en moi. En cela, il me donne de l'espace, il me laisse vivre" (29). This is not a God who demands obedience as a tribute to his creative power ("he hates to hear that one believes in him"), but a God who expects his creatures to honour the creative power in them. Accordingly, he has "the politeness to absent himself from the world" so as to engender a vital space where his creatures may "live," hence exercise their creative agency vis-à-vis their own lives. This room for possibility and choice is also the room of what

may be said and lives as potentiality in the interstices of words.⁴

Creation is therefore generated not by words alone, but in the silent and pregnant space between words, in the interplay between the said and the unsaid, and in the dialogue between “the double and the foreigner in me.” God is conceived as my same (“double”) and my Other (“étranger” [foreigner]), thus in the likeness of the interlocutor with whom relation is possible because of a shared sameness, and necessary because of a challenging difference. Creativity therefore occurs in the vital space between sameness and otherness, which is configured in these re-creation scenes as the interplay between creative creatures and their co-created creator. This interplay also prefigures the intra- and intersubjective spaces where sameness and otherness are negotiated within the self and among individuals.

Creativity as an aesthetics and ethics of response

The creation scenes described above perform re-creations. They thereby deviate from the notion of creation *ex nihilo* and pragmatically and conceptually propose creativity as ongoing re-creation. As re-creations, they participate in a long lineage of past and present understandings of

⁴ In her essay “Por qué se escribe” [Why one writes], the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano claims that this interplay between the said and the unsaid is preserved in the “act of faith” of writing, which consists in sharing a “revealed secret” that resists explanation but calls for communication: “Puro acto de fe el escribir, y más, porque el secreto revelado no deja de serlo para quien lo comunica escribiéndolo. El secreto se muestra al escritor, pero no se le hace explicable; es decir, no deja de ser secreto para él primero que para nadie, y tal vez para él únicamente, pues el sino de todo aquel que primeramente tropieza con una verdad es encontrarla para mostrarla a los demás y que sean ellos, su público, quienes desentrañen su sentido” (Zambrano, 40). [To write is a sheer act of faith, and all the more so since the revealed secret does not lose its secrecy to the person who communicates it through writing. The secret reveals itself to the writer but does not render itself explicable; that is, it does not lose its secrecy to the writer before losing it to anybody else, and maybe to him only, for the fate of he who first stumbles upon a truth is to find it so as to show it to others, and it is for others, his public, to disembowel its meaning.]

creativity as divine creation, secular creativity and natural procreation.⁵ Over time, the topic has attracted interest from various quarters, ranging from theology to business, physics, biology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and the arts. As Rob Pope notes in *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005), there has been a shift from *object-centred* approaches to creativity, derived from a Judeo-Christian “notion of ‘creation from nothing’ [that] persisted, and was maintained even by a rational empiricist such as John Locke” (37), to some contemporary *process-centred* approaches:

[T]his emphasis upon what may be called *creation as past fact rather than current act* was to prove of enduring significance. It is maintained in object-centred approaches to aesthetics which stress the overriding importance of the finished work of art as ‘the artist’s creation’, as distinct from practice-based approaches which stress the activity of creating and the more or less artisanal process of making. (...) Its counterpart in commodity aesthetics – in advertising and marketing, for instance – is an emphasis on the shiny product for consumption rather than the messy process of production (...). An emphasis upon the *created* rather than the *creating* aspects of creation is also there in approaches to literature and the arts that stress appreciation of the finished work rather than an understanding of its manner of composition and modes of transmission and reproduction. In all these cases, the model of ‘divine creation from nothing’ underwrites an aesthetics and a politics of fixed (not fluid) form and absolute (not relative) value. (Pope, 38)

⁵ See Raymond Williams’s entry on “Creative” in *Keywords* (1988, 82-4). In the beginning was divine creation, according to which “the ‘creature’ – who has been created – cannot himself create”; only in the Renaissance was this Augustine meaning extended to “indicate present or future [human] making” (82). “Creativity, a general name for the faculty” to create, emerged in the twentieth century (83). For a more developed history of the term, see Paul Dawson’s “From imagination to creativity” in his *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005, 21-47); and Pope’s chapter “Re-creation myths, ancient and modern” (Pope, 137-67).

Accordingly, Pope offers a dynamic and dialogic definition of creativity: “Creativity is extra/ ordinary, original and fitting, full-filling, in(ter)ventive, co-operative, un/ conscious, fe< >male, re...creation” (Pope, 52). Rather than “a once-and-for-all act,” he redefines creativity as “re...creation” (84), hence as a dynamic and open-ended process of collaborative relations which shares “the performative aspect of speaking/ writing and listening/ reading” as proposed by speech act and reception theories, and “resonates with Bakhtin’s notion of the vibrantly ‘dialogic’ utterance that is constantly ‘response-able’ (i.e. both responsive and responsible) with respect to current conditions and surrounding people”; thus, “[t]o be fully ‘response-able’ is inevitably to be involved in re...creation” (85).

Jennifer Johnston’s (and Colette Fellous’s) re-creations notoriously “counter-sign, re-invent, re-vision and re-member” the Judeo-Christian genesis, just as they deviate from its Romantic derivative, the “genius” as “the ultimate embodiment, of ‘the great man as ‘creator’ – or ‘destroyer’,” hence “the personalised quintessence of a highly individualised brand of creativity, [of] ‘creativity as hero’, with an overwhelming emphasis on the male” (Pope, 105). In the face of a divine creator traditionally conceived as male, and of a history of *human* creators self-engendered in the likeness of their divine forefather, these “fe< >male” re-creations reconfigure the relation between creator and creature as a collaborative, dynamic and open process rather than as a hierarchical, autocratic and finished gesture. By restoring agency to the creature and going beyond active and passive polarities, they re-envisage *being* as *becoming*, so that, as Pope argues, “the ‘human being’ had perhaps be better conceived as a series of *human becomings*” (78).

In recent literature on creativity, as in Jennifer Johnston’s novels, *being* is rendered as a creative process of *co-becoming*. Like the theories, the novels enact this in-between space of relation where sameness and difference, subjectivity and objectivity come into play. They further take a close look at how the multiple reverberations of specific constraints require intricate choices and the ability to devise possibilities of co-living with others and with the otherness of change and the unknown.

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